

Surviving Changing Times

The Singer-Songwriter Boudewijn de Groot

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[W I M C H I E L E N S]

I was very surprised when for the purpose of this article I revisited Boudewijn de Groot's discography. The man is an institution in the Dutch-language musical genre and anyone in Flanders or the Netherlands who has a small record collection always has something of his on their shelves. He made twelve albums. Just one dozen, less than 150 songs and yet you have the feeling Boudewijn de Groot wrote at least 50 classics! When he turned seventy in 2014, he said farewell to his old repertoire. He would never sing it on stage again. For his faithful public this was something of a shock. Meanwhile De Groot has a new album out and hence again a repertoire to perform. The fans secretly hope that the classics will sneak their way back in, even if it is only as a third encore. And they don't get too worked up about it, Boudewijn has already bid farewell to, even renounced his old repertoire at least twice before. Everything comes back, because that's what he likes singing about most, about what is past and how it, whether you want or not, shapes the present or even obstructs it.

A child of sixteen

In 98 percent of cases, anyone talking about the classics of Boudewijn de Groot is talking about songs for which his fellow student at film school and contemporary Lennaert Nijgh wrote the lyrics. The first of them date from 1963, the latest are on his eleventh album *Lage Landen* (Low Countries) from 2007. It all began with an 8 mm film that Lennaert Nijgh made in which his friend Boudewijn de Groot played the part of a troubadour. He sang two songs, written by himself. Nothing happened with the songs, but it did put them in contact with a record company that made singles. They were touching protest songs that pleaded for free love and gently kicked the shins of the conservative bourgeoisie. The singer accompanied himself on a classical guitar. The singles flopped, and the EP that collected all four numbers on one disc also bombed. Just as Phonogram was about to give up the duo, producer Tony Vos suggested recording a commercial song. The choice fell on a translation (by Nijgh) of 'Une enfant' by Charles Aznavour.



Boudewijn de Groot on the left and Liesbeth List on the right

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Protest singer

The single became a modest hit and with the LP that followed, Boudewijn de Groot was immediately labelled a Dutch protest singer. 'Een kind van zestien' (A Child of Sixteen) was the only song from French, the rest were translations of songs by Paul Simon, The Kinks, Bob Dylan ('The Times They Are A-Changin'') and two by Donovan. But there were also songs of their own, completely in the style of the covered artists. 'Welterusten, Mijnheer De President' (Good Night, Mr President) was the song that put Nijgh and De Groot on the map as a duo. Nijgh wrote it at the request of De Groot who wanted to do *something* with the Vietnam War. It came out in 1965, long before the great European protests against American actions in Vietnam. The song is an open letter to President Lyndon B. Johnson:

*Mr President, good night to you and yours
Sleep tight in your nice white home.
Don't think too much about those distant shores
where your boys are sitting lonely, far from home.
Especially don't think of those forty-six dead,
That recent mistake with that bombing raid.*

No more protesting

All through his life, Boudewijn de Groot will be unable to deal with turns in his artistic career that seem imposed upon him. Whenever he feels the slightest pressure from his public, he will do precisely the opposite to what is expected of him. For example, in 1966 he already wanted to be rid of the label protest singer. On their second LP *Voor de overlevenden* (For the Survivors) there was not one song that suggested any social commitment. Cover versions were a thing of the past and lyricist Nijgh displays the full range of his classic themes: unattainable loves, heartache, friends, the past won't come back. In a rather cryptic way, they also literally take their leave of the protest song:

*They've said new times are on their way,
they've fought for a new morality then.
They've not heeded what others had to say,
I don't feel like doing it over again.*

'New times are on their way' refers here to Nijgh's translation of Dylan's 'The Times They Are A-Changin''. Indeed, doing things over again is not something for Boudewijn de Groot and Lennaert Nijgh (Bo and To as they called each other). *Voor de overlevenden* (For the Survivors) became a classic album in the Low Countries. With the carnivalesque 'Het Land van Maas en Waal', he scored his first number one and the whole LP went gold. Of the twelve songs on *Voor de overlevenden*, perhaps seven have become part of the canon of Dutch song. Although Lennaert Nijgh was only twenty, he was already writing songs where nostalgia had the upper hand.



Album cover, *Voor de overlevenden*, 1966



Album cover, *Picknick*, 1967

Following the Beatles

Musically and socially, Boudewijn de Groot was a sponge who absorbed everything he heard and never imitated it but did his own thing with it. After *Voor de overlevenden* the duo already wanted to bring out a new record the following year. It is 1967 and in Amsterdam flower power breaks out with full force. De Groot has caught the bug for psychedelic music and he produces the Dutch answer to the Beatles' concept album, *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The Beatles organised a kind of musical circus, so Bo and To would organise a picnic, because in flower power everyone wanted to be connected with nature.

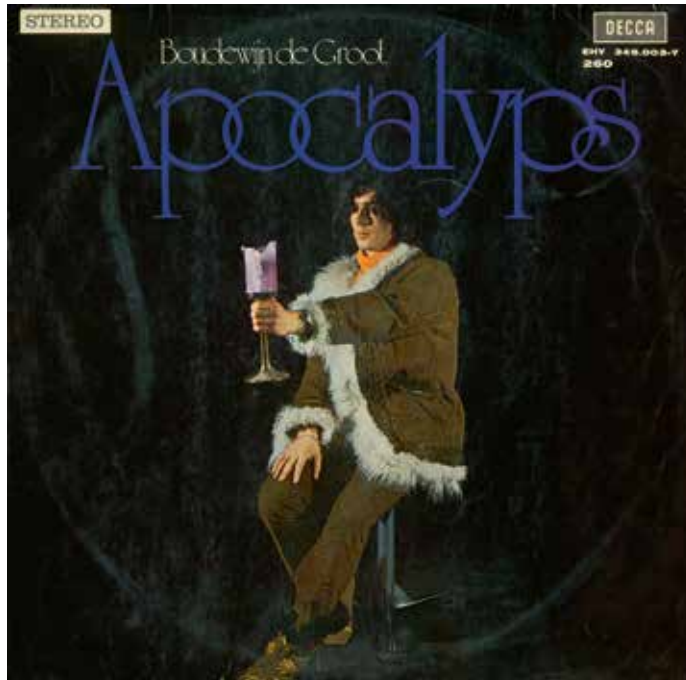
*We're giving a picnic,
for the elves and fairies here,
for the cattle and the deer,
for the livestock and everyone
must be nice, pluck a flower.*

The sleeve alone is a sample of flower power art in colour, typography and themes, of which few better examples can be found internationally. Not surprising, since it was designed by Seemon & Marijke (the Dutch artistic duo Simon Posthuma and Marijke Koger), who had previously worked for Procol Harum, the Incredible String Band and sure enough, the Beatles! In some songs, the reference to *Sergeant Pepper* is very clear: an Indian sitar can be heard; the second number is bathed in a jazzy Charleston atmosphere, like the Beatles' second number 'When I'm Sixty-Four'; and just like 'Day in the Life', 'Prikkebeen' concludes the LP with a piano chord lasting for a number of seconds. The psychedelic world of lyricist Lennaert Nijgh acquires a special Dutch variant, by linking the fantasy images of a drugs trip with the mythical scenes from the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch. In *Voor de overlevenden* (For the Survivors), the Hieronymus Bosch Circus had already put in the occasional appearance, now his best-known triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* became a song title, 'De tuin der lusten'. Nijgh wrote texts like hallucinatory trips. De Groot himself only half-understood what he was singing, but it worked perfectly.

*Yellow's the colour of remembered wheat
here in the steppes of molten glass,
blue is the fruit that's hard to eat,
the slivers taste sharp and bitter sweet.*

- from 'Glazen stilte' (Glass Silence)

Picknick (Picnic) became another classic album, the single 'Prikkebeen' became a hit and the duo was awarded an Edison (a prestigious Dutch music prize) for the album. And he could scarcely keep up with requests for performances. The sky seemed to be the limit and then ... you can be sure that Boudewijn de Groot was looking for a back way out.



Album cover , *Apocalyps*, 1970

English beat music

Nacht & Ontij (At All Hours) became an experimental record, a kind of *film for the ears* as Boudewijn calls it. He wrote the lyrics himself and there were only four numbers, including 'Heksensabbath' (Witches' Sabbath), which lasted over twenty-five minutes. The fans hated it, but perhaps they didn't mind that much. They could make do for quite a while with the golden songs from the previous records.

With the Provo movement Amsterdam has become, after Paris, *the hippy city* in Western Europe, and De Groot is now completely on a higher plane. He leaves his wife and children and heads to a commune in the countryside with friends, where he wants to make English beat music. The Tower and Session are two groups with which he tries to work in English, but it is a flop. The music is pedestrian, and Boudewijn's English is rather poor. In the commune, everyone seems to be living at the expense of the *troubadour who had done well for himself*. In 1970, disillusioned, he seeks out his old companion Lennaert Nijgh. In the first instance, they write a whole series of songs for the Dutch singer Rob De Nijs, who was never able to choose between rocker, crooner, chansonnier or pop singer. These became his most chanson-orientated albums, with huge hits all of which flowed from the pen of the brilliant duo Bo and To.

Back again

Gradually the desire grew once more to make an album of their own. The opening song could not have been more frank: 'Terug van weggeweest' (Back Again). The public takes note with great relief: Boudewijn de Groot is back again and he's singing songs like he used to. Lennaert Nijgh is able to put exactly into words what both Boudewijn and his fans sense:

*But on New Year's Eve
The scythe of the critics awaits.
And I'm ashamed of myself,
I destroy my music.
I was on the wrong track again,
again I dared too much.
Again I offered nothing
and asked for far too much.
And I forget,
I forget what went before.*

'Hoe sterk is de eenzame fietser' (How Strong the Solitary Cyclist Is) was a warmly welcomed comeback. 'Jimmy', the single from which the album title is also taken, again became a top-10 hit, the album went platinum and won them a second Edison. There is plenty of hit material and merriment on the record, but there is also plenty of room for the melancholy De Groot: the songs 'which are closest to my character and my basic mood,' he himself writes reflecting on the disc. The Christmassy song 'Onderweg' (En Route) is the prototype of these and the translations of two child's verses by William Blake are in the same vein. The record ends as it opens:

*Get bottles from the cellar,
let music fill the rooms.
Let everybody hear it:
the traveller is home.*

That was what the whole of the Netherlands and Flanders felt. They also wanted to hear him play live again and if at all possible with the songs from the classic albums. But in that you are barking up the wrong tree with Mr De Groot...



Album cover, *Hoe sterk is de eenzame fietser*, 1973



Déjeuner sur l'herbe with the singer, his wife and child and Lennaert Nijgh in the background.

Chilly reception

Lennaert Nijgh was again thanked for services rendered and Boudewijn struck up a partnership with another friend of his youth from the same film school where he and Nijgh had studied. Renee Daalder wanted a record that represented a definitive break with the past. The record must finish with 'the old Bo' and the new one must reveal all. The title spoke volumes: *Waar ik woon en wie ik ben* (Where I Live and Who I Am). In 'Travestie' a girl becomes the personification of 'the old Bo' and he rapes her until she has forgotten everything. An amateurish girl's voice also sings literally snatches of his best-known songs from the past, but he is merciless:

*You're singing old stuff there at least.
You are Beauty, I'm the beast.
I undress you.*

*[...]
My self-delight's seduced you quite
and your singing's worthless to me.
I want you now, here on the mat,
won't stop till you forget where it's at.*

Thousands of fans in the Low Countries felt offended by the song, for didn't everyone occasionally sing or hum a song by their favourite singer in an unguarded moment?

The record sounds very empty, even the luscious colour palette of Bert Paige was to no avail. The recordings are made in a studio in the Netherlands, but mixed in Hollywood. The technician there scratches his head about the poor quality of the recordings. The result is that the singer has to re-record all the vocals and guitar parts. The reception of the record was as chilly as its sound. Then five years of radio silence. The following album has many faces and many different lyricists. *Van een afstand* (From a Distance) it is called and Lennaert Nijgh seems to understand what it is about:

*Hey listen to what I say.
It has gone, I've gone away.
You can no longer take it or leave it.
No, it's just too late for you.
Turn around and go quick too.*

Boudewijn leaves behind his three children and current girlfriend in the Netherlands and goes to America, where he plans to attend a course on song writing. The record *Maalstroom* (Maelstrom) is created there. He writes almost all the lyrics, but still asks Nijgh for one song text. Nijgh knows exactly what is going on in the doubting head of his pal Bo.

*I worry about everything,
is what I'm doing
good, let me know.
Are times changing yet again
and then where am I to go?*

*High above there goes a plane
towards the sea below.
To LA, or even Rio.
Should I stay, or should I go?*

'Are times changing yet again?' is not a coincidental question, it refers to one of the pair's first collaborations: the translation of Dylan's 'The Times They Are A-Changin''. The record is completely ignored by the public and on the radio. It is 1984 and it seems Boudewijn de Groot may forever be associated with a few improbably powerful songs from the 1960s...

A new autumn

The silence lasts a long time. In showers and round campfires, Boudewijn's songs are still occasionally sung, but the artist has been forgotten. Boudewijn earns his living doing translations. For example, for a while he becomes the regular Dutch translator of the thrillers of Stephen King. Eight years after *Maalstroom* (Maelstrom), twelve years after his departure, he again winds up, this

time literally, on Lennaert Nijgh's doorstep. The American adventure is over and he's looking for a roof over his head and perhaps... also a lyricist, because he has an appetite for music again. Without Boudewijn, Lennaert has forgotten how to write. It takes forever. But in 1996, eleven years after the previous one, a new album appears: *Een nieuwe herfst* (A New Autumn). The title paraphrases the opening of a famous Dutch poem, 'Een nieuwe lente' (A New Spring). The long hair of the *hippie singer* has meanwhile gone grey and after such a long time both the press and the public are suspicious. Perhaps this is just old wine in new bottles. But no, after a few hearings it was clear that the partnership between De Groot and Nijgh, thirty years after 'The Times They Are A-Changin'', is still a magical synergy. Yes, they were still talking about lost and impossible loves, about friends, about the past and what has been won't come back. But both lyrics and music had gained a maturity which deeply moved a public that had grown old with him. For Lennaert the return of Boudewijn had something sacred about it, on this the last song is absolutely clear:

*Tell the whole of town
and shout in every ear:
the deaf will start to see,
the blind begin to hear.*

*Take the masks off now,
let all your tears now pour.
The rain's passed over now,
the angel's at the door.*

Lennaert will not live to see *Een nieuwe herfst* (A New Autumn) also become a classic album. He dies in 2002, leaving Boudewijn orphaned...

Album cover,
Een nieuwe herfst, 1996



An orphan in search of a voice

'Orphaned' is a more substantial choice of words than one may suspect at first sight. But it is of course true: Lennaert Nijgh is the father (or mother?) of the successful career that Boudewijn de Groot had in the Low Countries up to then. And as befits an artist, Boudewijn had a few attempts at patricide, but the facts remain the same. He brought out two further CDs with clever numbers, partly to posthumous texts by Nijgh; a man of his status also has the occasional nice text passed in his direction. 'De Vondeling van Ameland' (The Foundling of Ameland), for example, with lyrics by Freek de Jonge was again played endlessly on the radio in the Netherlands and Flanders. But Boudewijn realises that he must stand up and be counted and how difficult that is, with the legacy of the duo Nijgh/De Groot.

*Now you can no longer write
I've got to write myself:
new times are on the way
I know nothing else.
(...)*

*Writing a thousand ditties
I do it painlessly
but a thousand lovely words
how wise must you be.*

He tries almost convulsively to write a song, but gets no further than quotes from Lennaert's songs, since as you know by now: 'new times are on the way', was his translation of Dylan's 'The Times They Are A-Changin''.

*Now you can write no more
I've got to try myself:
now you can write no more
my god... this is a song.*

Movingly honest.

Boudewijn starts touring again and sings mostly his old repertoire. 'I shall always hold it dear,' he writes in an unguarded moment as a reflective comment on the tabula rasa of the LP *Waar ik woon en wie ik ben* (Where I Live and Who I Am).

And then, suddenly, that definitive farewell, on his seventieth birthday. The final end? Not at all. Just as Dylan, five years after the fairly weak disc *Love and Theft*, surprised everybody in 2006 as a reborn mischievous, swinging daddy with *Modern Times*, in 2015 Boudewijn de Groot's *Achter glas* (Behind Glass) was suddenly in shop windows. Except for two collaborative pieces and one Lennaert Nijgh quote, what else would one expect, all the texts are by Boudewijn himself. It is accordingly a very personal record in which for the first time he sings about some biographical passages of his life. About his father, for example, who left him along with his brother and sister with (a kind of) aunt to set out again for the colony of the Dutch East Indies. He never found out how a

father can do such a thing and later (when he returns to the Netherlands) never say a word about it. He never really knew who his father was and he sings about it in 'Anamorfose'.

*the picture jumps
the voice distorts
what's left is always the framework
don't stand hidden
in the shadow of time
come closer
don't hesitate come closer*

you were my father.

Much earlier, he had already written a moving song about his mother, who died in a Japanese concentration camp in the Dutch East Indies during the Second World War, when he was one year old: 'Moeder' (Mother). Now it is a tough text that makes a forceful entrance: 'Ik ben een zoon' (I am a Son).

*I am a son of western beaches under dark-grey skies
Although the sand where I was born has reddish tints
To this day I still feel those vague ties
They form the beginning of what's happened since.
It was the most vulnerable time of my mother's life
There she had me amid the filthy drains
And while those scarcely alive gratefully clung to life
Into a pit the Jap tipped her remains.*

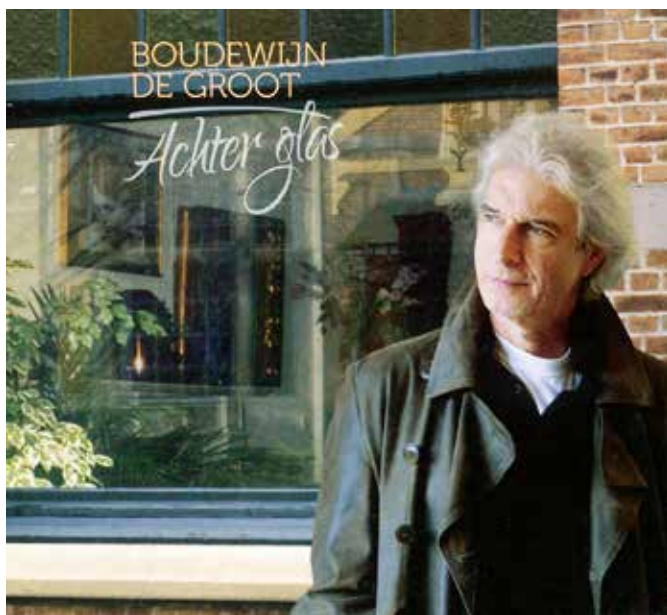
De Groot, unlike many writers and other artists who were born in the Dutch East Indies, has never been back to Indonesia ('the country of origin'), precisely because the trail to his mother leads no further than to her name on a monument.

*All that they could put on it was her name
I know her name - I might as well stay home.*

A song about his father, a song about his mother and then everything comes together in the title song: 'Achter glas' (Behind Glass). Now his parents are dead, he sees them only behind the glass of a photo frame, but he also sees himself under glass, we can simply only see ourselves in the mirror or in a selfie behind a glass screen. The title of his 1975 LP is as it were given a question mark: Where do I live and who am I? *Achter glas* (Behind Glass) is a new chapter in the rich career of Boudewijn de Groot and there is nothing to suggest that we must wait another eight years before the next one. In the song 'Witte muur' (White Wall) he surveys, in quick tempo in a typically De Groot rhythm, his whole career. We see him *high on the barricades*, we hear snatches of texts by Lennaert and now he sees *how the clock moves to winter time*. But the end is reassuring: *I wait and know that what I want to write / will come in good time*. The singer has found his own voice. It still sounds as boyish as in 1964, but

at last they are all his own words and they sound almost as fluent as those of his old companion. He just needs to wait a little and he will realise himself how faultlessly an evening song like 'Schemering' (Dusk) can move into that old winter song 'Onderweg' (En Route). In Boudewijn de Groot's career there is only one certainty: sooner or later 'times will change'. ■

www.boudewijndegroot.nl



Translated by Paul Vincent



*Album cover, *Achter glas*, 2015*